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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE EP: THE ICE IS SLOWLY  
BREAKING

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Government influence and oversight pervade the Eastern Province's (EP's) older civil society organizations. The SAG provides part of their funding, appoints or approves board members, and regulates their by-laws. Yet the ice is slowly breaking. The government is beginning to relinquish control over the established organizations in the EP, moving gradually to direct elections for board members and reducing its level of funding. Most impressively, a dynamic set of new organizations has taken root over the past five years. Unregistered and therefore tenuous in nature, these organizations, many of which are based in the EP's Shi'a community, include regular "cultural" forums where participants discuss even political issues, small community development organizations, Internet fora, and scientific clubs. Both sets of organizations face challenges: the older, more established organizations have to reinvent themselves in an era of declining government support, and the newer organizations have to operate in legal uncertainty, pushing the boundaries of what the SAG will permit but taking care not to push too hard. The new dynamism in EP civil society is a result of many factors, most importantly a drive for greater freedom of expression and the government's willingness to tolerate the extension of the bounds of the permitted, particularly with regards to dialogue. Civic-minded EP residents are hungry for more, and there are many opportunities at many levels for the USG to encourage this new dynamism. End summary.

¶2. (U) This review of civil society in the EP draws on the visits that the CG, PolOff, and PAO have made over the past eight months to a wide variety of civil society organizations and their leaders. It does not cover mosque-based organizations. Relevant reporting includes 2005 RIYADH 6859 and 2006 RIYADH 963 and 1197 (EPCCI); 2006 RIYADH 820 and 2893 (charitable societies); 2006 RIYADH 1380 and 1741 (NSHR); 2006 RIYADH 1053, 1252, and 1377 (forums); 2006 RIYADH 1706 (scientific club); and 2006 RIYADH 658 (businesswomen's forum).

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Established Civil Society: SAG Slowly Relinquishes Control  
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Charitable Societies

13. (SBU) The letter from the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs in 1962 that granted approval for the country's first official charitable society, the Seihat Society for Social Services, contains a clear statement of the extent of government control over established civil society. "We are herewith sending you draft by-laws for your compliance," the letter reads, "hoping that this project will come into existence for the noble purposes for which it is established." Charitable societies are the most prolific of established civil society organizations in the EP, ranging from the massive Bir Society to much humbler societies in Qatif's smaller villages. Registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, these societies receive some government funding but are also closely regulated: the SAG has the right to veto elected board members (and has exercised this right recently in at least one case in Qatif) and ensures that the societies' activities fall under the rubric of social services. While the SAG supports these societies financially, contributing 24 percent and 13 percent of annual operating expenses to two societies we visited, this percentage is dropping over time. Societies like Bir and the Gulf Women's Association, which are well connected to the EP Emir and leading business families, find that a contribution is "just a phone call away," but smaller societies have developed revenue generating activities relying on extensive volunteer networks. With programs ranging from the more traditional income support to poor families to more innovative training programs, these societies are becoming increasingly dynamic. They have a particularly strong presence in Shi'a communities, which have organized to fill the vacuum left by discrimination, relative poverty, and limited government assistance.

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#### Sports and Literary and Artistic Clubs

14. (SBU) Sports and literary and artistic clubs, an important sector of EP civil society, are even more closely connected to the government than charitable societies. Sports clubs provide facilities for recreation at subsidized rates for men only and also sponsor competitive teams. Here again, elected board members are subject to the approval of the SAG's General Presidency of Youth Welfare and the government provides some funding. As with the charitable societies, the percentage of club revenue provided directly by the government is declining, forcing the clubs' boards to be more innovative in fund-raising and revenue collection. "The government gave us 160,000 riyals this year, but our soccer team alone costs us 750,000 riyals," noted a member of Al-Nahda's new board. The outgoing president of another EP club's board complained that the government had not actually made its promised contribution in years. The SAG heavily regulates the sports leagues, particularly the way revenue is generated and distributed. With EP sports clubs facing declining government support yet lacking room to innovate, the major role of the board members is fundraising, and several clubs have had difficulty attracting volunteers for the board.

15. (C) Changes in the literary and artistic clubs are far more dramatic. The Ministry of Information, which regulates the EP Literary Association, recently appointed a new, more liberal board, replacing long-serving conservative figures who practiced, as one of our contacts put it, "administration of the stomach," using the Association's budget allocation to put on functions more noteworthy for their food than their literary significance. According to Ahmed Al-Mulla, new board member and spokesperson for the EP Literary Association, the Ministry has "charged the new board with developing a general membership that will elect a new board in four years." Al-Mulla also said that the Association may hold events without asking for permission, whereas previously it needed permission from the EP Emir's office, the head of the Riyadh Literary Association, the Ministry of Information,

the Mutawwa', and the Mubahith. On the artistic front, the Ministry is allowing the EP's Arts and Cultural Society to split into several societies focused on specific branches of art (e.g., painting, photography, theater, etc.). Our contacts are optimistic that these societies, which will continue to receive some government funding, will have a reasonable degree of freedom to pursue artistic endeavors.

#### The Chambers of Commerce

16. (C) Perhaps the oldest institution of civil society is the EP Chamber of Commerce & Industry (EPCCI), founded in the early 1950s within the Ministry of Commerce and Industry but now an independent entity regulated by the Ministry. As befits its membership, the EPCCI is financially independent of the SAG but the government has retained a degree of control by appointing one third of its board members. During the most recent election cycle for the board, which featured much greater competition than in the past, the Ministry announced that it would cease to appoint board members starting with the next election, in 2010. While increased competition and a reduced SAG hand in future governance are promising signs, the close and cronyist nature of government-business relations in the EP are the major obstacle to true dynamism at the EPCCI and the EP's smaller, more local chambers. As Khalid Al-Bawardi, a former EPCCI board member who did not seek election or appointment in this election cycle, put it, "The board members don't want to confront the government because they don't want to lose their established position." The board members are the "big fish" of the EP business community and prioritize their own interests above developing the EP's economy in general or sharing with their smaller counterparts.

#### The National Society for Human Rights - EP Branch

17. (C) A new entrant in the EP's registered civil society is the EP branch of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), which had its official opening in early April. The branch's governance and administrative structure are not notable: the SAG appoints its five board members, the branch itself channels its work through the head NSHR office in Riyadh, and funding comes from an endowment from the SAG. What is notable, however, are the human rights focus of the organization and the people the SAG appointed to the EP

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branch's board. At least four of the five appointees are Shi'a (including one woman), one a Majlis Al-Shura member and the other three local leaders and activists who are intent on "taking advantage of all available means" to promote reform. We know three of these individuals well and they are by no means "patsies" of the Saudi government. It is too early to tell what impact the EP branch of the NSHR will have, but the SAG's decision to create the national organization and to place Shi'a activists on the EP branch's board is another indication that it is allowing greater freedom to established civil society in the EP.

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#### A New Dynamism: The Blossoming of Unregistered Organizations

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18. (SBU) In stark contrast to the established organizations profiled above, a number of new, unregistered civil society organizations have sprung up in the EP over the past five years. Smaller, more dynamic, and unaffiliated with the government, these organizations have different strengths and weaknesses than their established counterparts.

#### "Cultural", aka Political, Forums

19. (C) Regular "cultural" forums are perhaps the most significant manifestation of unregistered civil society in the EP. These forums take place at the organizers' homes on a regular basis, generally weekly or monthly, each time

featuring an invited speaker and topic. For example, Najeeb Al-Khunaizi's forum in Qatif recently hosted Saudi film-maker Haifa Al-Mansour; Ali Al-Dumaini's and Fawzia Al-Ayouni's forum in Dammam recently featured a women's rights activist from Bahrain; and PAO spoke in April at a women's forum in Al-Ahsa. Jafar Al-Shayeb's weekly forum in Qatif is the best organized; he provides short summaries of the past week's forum by e-mail, and presentations are often covered in Internet articles (see below). The forums are popular among socially active Saudis, some but not all secular in orientation. Their organizers consciously seek to create bridges with other groups in Saudi Arabia. Forums in Qatif, for instance, have featured discussions on the relationship between secularism and Islam and have hosted "religiously conservative but open-minded" figures from the Nejd.

¶10. (C) These forums differ from majlises in that they have speakers and discussion and intentionally address political issues; several of our contacts even describe them as "representing political parties" in Qatif. The movement began in the EP with two forums established in Qatif four or five years ago, and now includes, from what our contacts tell us, to at least nine forums in Qatif and six in Dammam/Khobar and Al-Ahsa. The number of forums will continue to grow: several of our contacts, for example, are building new houses with halls to host new forums. With attendance ranging from 30 to 100 at any given forum, the forums certainly do not represent a mass movement and have nowhere near the drawing power of a mosque. Instead, their significance lies in the topics discussed and the fragile but growing networks, political at their essence, being built. The SAG knows about these gatherings and, for the most part, tolerates them. Several organizers have told us the SAG asked them to shut theirs down, forcing a three-month closure in one case, but in general the organizers have persisted with no severe repercussions.

#### Organizations and Clubs

¶11. (C) A number of unregistered organizations and clubs, different from the "cultural forums" in that they focus on particular issues and often provide services, have also sprung up in the EP in recent years. Some of these are essentially small community development organizations that, to take an example from Qatif, offer computer training and other educational services to community members. They are similar in concept to the established charitable societies, though smaller and without a formal organizational structure.

The Qatif Astronomy Society, a larger and more formal organization dedicated to the pursuit and teaching of astronomy, offers a different model. Although still unregistered, it has a branch in Al-Ahsa and its website and programs attract interest from throughout Saudi Arabia. The society's leaders see their visibility as an asset and a weakness vis-a-vis the SAG. While appreciating national and even some international support from the academic community,

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the society's vice president noted that, "we are in a weak position. Anyone can close us down at any time. So we try to be very transparent."

#### Cyberspace

¶12. (C) Cyberspace is another rapidly growing forum for dialogue and community organization in the EP, both as a complement to existing organizations such as the cultural forums and in its own right. As with the clubs and cultural forums, the Shi'a seem more advanced at using the Internet as a tool of civil society than other communities specific to the EP. Saudi Shi'a operate several active sites that provide forums for the exchange of information and community news. Perhaps the most active is the Rasid News Network ([www.rasid.org](http://www.rasid.org)), which carries articles, opinion pieces, summaries of local meetings, and polls. One of our more liberal contacts described the site's editors as

conservative, but said they "have always accepted my pieces, even though I know they do not agree." As her comment suggests, a wide variety of opinions are represented, and polls and comment sections keep the site interactive. One recent poll, headlined by a photograph of smoke billowing from the World Trade Center's towers, asked visitors if they thought the SAG had done enough to combat religious extremism; predictably, given the Shi'a audience, 80 percent said "no." Our sense is that the editors and writers at Rasid, as well as those of other EP-based sites that touch on sensitive issues like human rights or governance, are involved in a delicate dance with the SAG. The editors are aware what the red lines are and know that the SAG monitors and often blocks direct dial-up access to their sites, yet they are not afraid to test the boundaries.

#### EP Businesses: Behind the Eight Ball

¶13. (SBU) EP businesses have been slow to participate in a new, more dynamic form of civil society. While the major business families are regular and often generous contributors to established civil society organizations like the major charitable societies and sports clubs, they have not broken out on their own to develop targeted foundations such as that of the Abdul Latif Jameel Company in Jeddah (see JEDDAH 216). This situation may be changing. The Al-Zamil family, for instance, is establishing a new center, to be named after the family patriarch, "to address in new ways social needs not being met by existing organizations." The center will give grants to educational and training institutions, loans to small businesses that are partners with Zamil companies, and support micro-enterprise initiatives of female-headed households. Asked if the center was registered, Khalid Al-Zamil chuckled. "I know that that can be a real problem. Right now, it is under our business umbrella, but at some point we'll have to register it."

¶14. (C) On the margins of the EP business community and representative of the newer civil society organizations is the Businesswomen's Forum, a group of about 40 businesswomen led by Dr. Aisha Al-Maneh, longtime activist for women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Founded several years ago, this group seeks to create more opportunities for women in the private sector. Four of the six female candidates for the recent EPCCI board elections were members of the group, which provided financial and organizational support to their candidacy. The Businesswomen's Forum lacks the support of the mainstream EP business community, as reflected in the poor showing of the female candidates. Legal status is a major stumbling block: the group has been rebuffed by the government and EPCCI in its attempts to register, meaning that it cannot, for example, rent hotel meeting rooms in its name.

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#### Behind the Blossoming: 9/11 and the SAG Response

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¶15. (C) Our contacts agree that civil society is blossoming in the EP, at least by past Saudi standards, and they consistently give 9/11 as the turning point. "In a certain way, we benefited from Osama bin Laden," explained Dhahran-based social activist and former specialist in educational reform Fawzia Al-Ayouni. "After 9/11 people in society woke up and realized that there needed to be a dialogue," continued her husband, Ali Al-Dumaini, one of the three imprisoned reformers King Abdullah pardoned shortly

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after becoming king. EP activists are adept at using King Abdullah's call for dialogue and tolerance, itself a response to 9/11, as a shield for their civil society organizations. An Al-Ahsa organizer introduced the forum in Al-Ahsa at which PAO recently spoke by invoking King Abdullah and the importance he placed on dialogue with other cultures, the theme of the latest National Dialogue. An activist Shi'a



sheikh in Al-Ahsa, whom the Mubahith ordered to shut down his forum because an informant had said a session on the recent OIC summit in Mecca was "political," provided the Mubahith with a tape of the session, argued that it was not political, and finally told the Mubahith that "rather than shutting my forum down you should thank me, because I am encouraging dialogue and tolerance as King Abdullah has directed." He was allowed to reopen his forum three months later.

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Challenges and Opportunities  
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¶16. (C) As the SAG relaxes its control over their boards and reduces financial support to them, the established EP civil society organizations have a need and an opportunity to reinvent themselves. The need is least with the well-financed charitable societies and the Chambers of Commerce, and strongest with the literary and artistic clubs and smaller charitable societies. The greatest shortcoming of many of these established organizations, from what we can see, is professional management. The sports clubs and many of the charitable societies are managed on an evening-to-evening basis by a volunteer board, many of whose members are active professionals who work at places like Aramco or manage their own companies. While these board members bring valuable skills, the clubs and smaller societies do not seem to be developing a group of permanent employees with administrative and fund-raising skills.

¶17. (C) The central challenge facing the newer civil society organizations is operating without legal status. Their organizers have ambitions and, in many cases, resources, but they cannot move too fast, grow too large, or address certain topics because they would risk crossing a line and being shut down. They are well aware that the SAG could decide to clamp down at any time, turning this period of blossoming into a "Prague spring," as one of our contacts put it. With the exception of the Dammam branch of the NSHR, we do not know of any organizations recently registered in the EP, and our contacts believe it would be futile to ask for registration from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Limited in their ability to grow by their lack of official status, leaders of many of these organizations are instead concentrating on building a network of support and linkages that offer them some protection from arbitrary shutdown by the SAG.

¶18. (C) Leaders of almost all of the EP civil society organizations we have talked with, both established and unregistered, have expressed great interest in U.S. public diplomacy programs, particularly those that would allow them to improve their own expertise and build linkages with counterpart institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere. The SAG does not allow them to accept money from external sources, but that limitation does not deter their enthusiasm. "We have resources in our communities," a Shi'a activist who runs a small center for handicapped children in Safwa told us. "But we need the expertise." We believe there are many programmatic opportunities for the U.S. to support civil society in the EP. On a smaller scale, we will continue to nominate leaders and managers of EP civil society organizations for training and exchange programs and to offer programs with visiting experts, when available. Opportunities exist for larger scale programs as well, and we plan to explore specific ideas in a future cable.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
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